

Speech - FUEN-president Hans Heinrich Hansen at the Committee of the Regions

Dear Friends of FUEN,
Dear Guests!

Today is a great day for us. FUEN is celebrating its 60th birthday. The fact that this day is being celebrated in the Committee of the Regions is a particular signal, and we thank you, the members of the Committee of the Regions, and especially you, Secretary-General Stahl, for the friendly reception.

We have been working towards getting a foothold in official Europe for a long time. It is important to us.

FUEN, the Federal Union of European Nationalities, is a piece of living, active Europe, colourful, diverse, and non-conform.

This is our strength: we give diversity a voice. And this voice has many tones, sometimes loud, sometimes quiet, but always authentic, because it lives from the experiences of its members and member organisations, all of which have had, and still have, an eventful life.

So what you have with us, FUEN, is a piece of concentrated history of the people in Europe. Minorities live under different conditions than the majority population, because they have quite obviously been seen as political pawns. Today we are learning that, in a globalised world, the established peoples are experiencing exactly the same.

The minorities have tackled this problem, and have not just behaved the way they were supposed to. This resistance potential has occasionally resulted in some players becoming regarded as stick-in-the-muds, so that the minorities generally ended up with a reputation for being rather conservative. But that is also a strength: standing up for what you believe is right and good, even if it is initially damaging for your cause.

What we are working towards is to ensure that this non-conforming independence is preserved.

What we in FUEN are working towards is that we, as minorities and as people, can be what we want to be – and not just follow the norm like well-behaved sheep.

When we talk of Europe, we mean the essence of this splendid union. We think and believe in what has made Europe what it is: a community with many different languages, many different cultures, and many different ways of living and being.

As FUEN, we are the mouthpiece of our members at European level.

We are, in the best sense, the civil society representatives of the autochthonous European minorities.

Now as a German North Schleswiger from Denmark I am going to do something typically Danish: I am not going to mention all our VIP guests by name, but that doesn't mean that we are not very happy that you have come along today. Thank you!

Many representatives of our member organisations have come, and it's very good to be able to look into so many familiar faces. Because on a day like today, the main thing is to honour all our member organisations, because they are what makes FUEN what it is.

Please allow me, on their behalf, to very warmly welcome the past presidents of FUEN –

- Dr. Karl Mitterdorfer, South Tyrolean from Italy, president from 1977 to 1982 and then again from 1990 to 1994. Karl Mitterdorfer is 89 years old and honorary president of FUEN – honoured for his services to FUEN.
- Dr. Reginald Vospernik, Slovenian from Austria, FUEN president from 1982 to 1986;
- Pere Lemoine, Breton from France, president from 1986 to 1990, and
- Prof. Dr. Christoph Pan, South Tyrolean from Italy, president from 1994 to 1996.

Without you, FUEN would not be where it is today. And I am very pleased that you are here with us today. With your commitment and dedication you have had a significant impact on the development of FUEN.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

When we look back on 60 years of FUEN today, we see that we are in good company.

The Council of Europe was, as you well know, also established in 1949. And we have a lot in common with the Council of Europe and the pan-European idea. For example, we happen to be celebrating our (60th) birthday in the same year.

I don't think this is accidental, I think it is the implementation of the European idea in a different form.

60 years is a long time. So let me give you a brief review of our history.

The early years of FUEN were marked by the barbarous experiences of the Second World War and the crushing persecution and appalling exploitation of the minorities.

In 1949 the message heard in many European countries, and from many minority and regional representatives was: "Never again!" The nation state had failed – something had to be done.

In 1989, Frederik Paulsen, North Frisian from Germany and founder member of FUEN, spoke in Versailles about how FUEN came into being. I quote:

The genesis of FUEN began with a conference held by the French federalists, an organisation by the name of "La federation", whose secretary was the Breton Joseph Martray, on 29th April 1949 at the Palais Chaillot in Paris.

Several West Frisians and North Frisians were also invited to the conference. This Breton-Frisian contact resulted in the passing of a motion that all the minorities of Western Europe should be invited to the next conference.

This second conference, the actual foundation conference, was originally meant to take place in September in Merano in South Tyrol. But at the last moment it was forbidden by the Italian government, something that created a major political stir, and not just in Italy.

The foundation conference was then postponed until the 19th and 20th of November 1949 and moved to Versailles. The initiator and organiser of this conference was the Breton Martray.

More than 200 delegates took part. Most were French regionalists who wanted to oppose the concentration of power in the capital. The same went for the participants from Italy, Switzerland, Germany and the Netherlands.

They were there to represent regions, not ethnic groups or language minorities. Martray recognised the problem, and skilfully steered the delegates of the ethnic groups into seeing that they needed to establish their own organisation, our Federal Union of European Nationalities, FUEN.

Hidden behind these meagre words is another piece of history, one that could not be more exemplary. Why was it a Breton who championed the establishment of a minority organisation at European level; why did the Italian government ban the conference?

The history of the minorities and the establishment of FUEN are history in focus. A government shows its true face in how it treats its minorities.

There is also a special reason why I state this passage, explaining where FUEN has its roots. The man we honour as the father of FUEN, the Breton Joseph Martray, died a few weeks ago at the age of 95. I would like to pay him tribute for what he achieved in his lifetime – because for the Breton cause, and for FUEN, he was a vitally important champion of the idea of minorities.

Anyone who starts to immerse himself or herself in the history of FUEN, soon becomes captivated. I am sure that the author of the history of FUEN, Jørgen Kühl, who is also here today – will agree. His interesting treatment of the history is available outside in the lobby and you can purchase a copy for the symbolic FUEN Jubilee promotional price of 10 euros. It's worth it.

Now let me highlight a few observations about FUEN over the last 20 years, and link these to European policy on minorities.

The decisive dawning of the new era was 1989 /1990

The collapse of the Eastern bloc resulted in many new nations in Europe. The national minorities in Central and Eastern Europe had the opportunity to organise themselves, and demand their rights. FUEN accepted many new members in those years and developed into a pan-European organisation.

The subject of minorities in Europe was promptly put on the agenda as the national conflicts broke out in the Balkans on such a devastating scale.

There was no security policy conference where the topic of minorities was not on the agenda.

The European decision makers recognised that a solution had to be found in order to prevent more conflicts like those in the Balkans.

The minorities issue was also a security issue, and this is when the Council of Europe minority documents came into being, the language charter and the framework convention.

In the early nineties FUEN was vigorously canvassing for sustainable and far-reaching protection of minorities in Europe. There were many fascinating drafts for such minority protection - such as the Cottbus Declaration.

But we have to accept that for the states involved, this was not really about sustainable safeguarding and advancement of minorities, it was just a way of quickly pacifying minority issues in Europe.

So everyone agreed on a “light” version of minority protection: the language charter and the framework convention are in our opinion such “light” products.

This is why FUEN has always emphasised that cannot be the final stroke.

We continue to demand - today more insistently than ever – that we must establish more stringent minority protection in Europe, protection that far transcends what is in the aforementioned documents.

Up to now I have spoken about the Council of Europe and the documents drawn up therein. It is almost historical irony, that in recent years it is the European Union that has provided the strategic incentives for minority protection. Historical irony, because the EU has always been very anxious not to speak out on the question of autochthonous minorities in Europe.

With the adoption of the Copenhagen Criteria, which listed the protection of minorities as a condition of acceptance into the EU, the EU had however created a fait accompli. In order to fulfil the criteria, many of the new EU states created good minority protection legislation.

FUEN welcomed the Copenhagen Criteria but at the same time lamented the double standards this produced. The new member states were obliged to implement new, better minority protection, whereas the criteria did not apply to the “old” EU countries.

And another problem loomed ahead in addition to these double standards. The fact that some states were back-peddalling from the standards that had been achieved.

Why should a new EU state fulfil standards for the protection of minorities when other EU states are not required to?

So as gratifying as the Copenhagen Criteria were, it is quite apparent that nobody had thought about how these standards were to be guaranteed after acceptance as an EU member.

The amended Slovakian Language Law has created quite a stir in recent weeks – also throughout Europe. The intention of this law is, in my opinion, a blatant example of backing away from standards that have been achieved.

FUEN is of the opinion that a minority language must be protected and promoted. To restrict its use, or even make it a punishable offence as is the case here, is a violation of everything FUEN stands for, and should also be a violation of the fundamental principles of the EU.

It is also conspicuous that the EU is not getting involved here, and not clearly coming out on the side of the Hungarian minority.

When countries do not come out on the side of minority protection and back-pedal on standards it is a European problem.

I fear that we have yet to encounter other examples of this, and we need a clear signal from those responsible for Europe, that they are serious about protecting minorities.

FUEN is an organisation that goes beyond the EU.

All the states of Europe should stick up for the protection of minorities, and the EU must lead the way.

How can you expect Georgia to implement any minority protection legislation when Greece doesn't even recognise that it has any minorities?

There is no need to be afraid of us - the autochthonous minorities in Europe.

We do not make any territorial claims or destabilise the states we live in.

We live in European regions, and we want these regions to flourish.

One should not see us as a threat, but as potential for the development of these regions.

In some regions in Europe this potential offered by the minorities has been recognised, and the minorities are accepted as teammates in the development of the region.

George Bernhard Shaw once said:

The worst sin toward our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them.

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The newly published book by the former representative of South Tyrol in the European Parliament, Michl Ebner, is entitled "Unity in Diversity" and is about European minorities. In the foreword by the former chair of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, he says:

The right to use one's own language and to experience it being taught and disseminated is just one example of a greater right, the right to express oneself and assert oneself like all other Europeans.

Many of the smaller and smallest languages in Europe are threatened with extinction. As you can see out in the lobby, FUEN, through its Network RML2Future, funded by the European Commission and South Tyrol, is actively involved in supporting the smaller and smallest languages in Europe.

With our limited means, and by setting up a European centre of expertise we are attempting to do our bit to promote the smaller and smallest languages.

But this is where the politicians also need to do something. Cultural diversity in Europe is under threat, and we need a policy that puts the active promotion and revival of the smaller and smallest languages in Europe on the agenda.

Speakers of regional and minority languages are the prototypes of the multilingual Europeans, because what they do today will be an everyday occurrence in future.

By preserving their language they contribute to the diversity of Europe.

They are innately multilingual, they use the languages of the neighbouring regions, learn other languages, and acquire expertise that is prerequisite for living together in a multicultural society.

In the future, people will accomplish a great deal of things in life using several languages – everyday life as well as in career or education.

Language is as emotional as it is functional.

Language is both your native country and the big, wide world.

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You see that FUEN's portfolio is very diversified. In recent years we have become more political – which not everyone is happy about. But it is our job to stand up for the minorities at European level, and we can only do that if we are taken seriously politically and we plead our case with a sense of proportion, but also with self-confidence.

The fact that we have raised our profile in recent years is also significantly due to the many incentives for which we have to thank our young people.

YEN – the Youth of European Nationalities – is celebrating its silver jubilee (25 years) in 2009. And I would like to take this opportunity today to congratulate them once again.

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The presence of the autochthonous minorities in Europe is one of the best-kept secrets in Europe. We are working to change that, and we are having success.

I am pleased that my predecessor Prof. Pan is also here – because I now want to refer to his empirical research, which has revealed some very important figures for us.

In the 45 states that belong to Europe there exist over 300 minorities with about 100 million members.

This means that about 1 in 7 Europeans admit to belonging to an autochthonous, national minority.

Around 90 languages are spoken in Europe.

37 of these are recognised national languages and 53 languages belong to what are known as stateless languages, the regional and minority languages.

Romano Prodi used the expression: Europe is a union of minorities.

There are big and small nation states in the EU, and if you are recognised as a nation state by the other nation states the size your population is irrelevant when it comes to being accepted into the machinery of power in the EU. On the other hand, there are quite a few minorities in various nation states that have a larger population than the smallest EU member states. They are not part of the power apparatus, and they only have a limited influence over their own fate. And this holds serious potential for conflict which can only be solved through dialogue, where you sit opposite one another as equals and negotiate with one another as equals.

We need mutual trust and trustworthiness.

And we can only achieve this through dialogue

In its 60-year existence, FUEN has given a home to the many different minorities, and has been the point of contact for understanding one another.

The annual congresses and assemblies of delegates are not just real, living intercultural dialogue, they also platforms for exchanging experiences and ideas, and very importantly, they give these

chastised, suppressed minorities, who are struggling to be recognised, the opportunity to express their fears and hardships in front of a large audience, and where they can articulate these to their nation states in the form of resolutions.

This is an important valve, which helps to dissipate aggression. And the old saying that together we are stronger was never more true.

Wherever there are problems we go on fact-finding missions. We give encouragement to our local members by helping them to draw attention to their grievances through direct contact with their governments.

FUEN's strength is that it is a democratic union that has not been swayed from its principles for the sake of short-term success. We have remained true to our goal of being the mouthpiece of the minorities in all matters concerning their existence.

The history of FUEN is a history of perseverance, continuity and reliability.

This is what we bring in, along with our great diversity, with what is now great professionalism, and with our unshakeable belief that we, the minorities, make a difference in society

We, FUEN, can be the link between minorities and the European Community.

In dialog with our members we can detect conflicts early on and, if you are prepared to accept us as teammates and equal partners at European level, we can help to defuse such conflicts.

As an NGO we have very different contacts to those at government level, contacts which could be useful for our mutual efforts in achieving peaceful solutions to minority conflicts. Isn't it worth a try?

We see the established dialogue forum with the Intergroup for autochthonous minorities in the European parliament as a great and important step in the right direction.

Jean Monnet once said:

As important as co-operation between nations is, it doesn't solve anything on its own.

What we need is a coalition of the interests of the European people, and not just the perpetuation of the balance of their interests.

And you can't express the European idea any better than that. It is not about dominance, it is about unity, and about the recognition and acceptance of ideas and diversity.

And we, FUEN, are part of that...